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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an interdisciplinary approach to the study of international management in Latin America, as offered in a course for advanced language (Spanish) students majoring in international management at the American Graduate School of International Management (Arizona). One of the goals of the course was to explain the history, traditions, and values of Latin American societies through chosen themes. One of the themes chosen was the search for identity by the Latin American people and the repercussions in the international business sphere, targeting specifically Mexico. The unit of study began with a review of Latin American geography, which led to discussion of the mixture of races and its consequences. Literary texts were chosen to recreate the historical epoch in which the issue of identity was vital; such texts present cultural behaviors which sometimes conflict among themselves, thus creating a microcosm. Students also presented reports about modern Mexico and discussed current events there. In order to avoid presenting only cultural contrasts, stereotypes, and isolated characteristics, the course recreated a more complete system of cultural practices in extended contexts with authentic materials. (JDD)

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Wanda Lauterborn
March 12, 1993
A.G.S.I.M.

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INTERNATIONALIZING BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

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An Exploration of Latin America Through Major Topics and the International Executive

The purpose of our program at the American Graduate School of International Management is to prepare individuals for management positions in more than one country, and to provide graduate management education with a clear multi-cultural and multi-lingual emphasis that equips graduates to perform effectively in a global environment.

This paper will describe ways of focusing the study of special themes in Latin America from an interdisciplinary approach, always keeping in mind the international executive and his or her area of geographic expertise.

In the global business environment, international executives must be able to speak the language of the geographical area in which they will be working. The must also know and understand the culture of that area and develop a sensitivity for the people's values and world views. This knowledge is provided by the study of a country's culture, which is composed of history, macroeconomics, literature, art, customs, folklore, and ethnic concerns, to name just a few aspects.

Themes such as social structure and social change in twentieth-century Latin America, economic aspects of Latin America, and violence and militarism, as well as other topics were chosen

because of their relevance to the international business environment. Certain regional characteristics of Latin America and the unifying features of its culture and society were also emphasized. Texts of different disciplines were utilized as work materials.

Since literature and the arts, in general, tend to reflect national concerns in Latin America more than in Europe and the United States, modern Latin American writers were studied, with a focus on their persistent concern with social issues.

The course which I am going to discuss targets an advanced language student whose major is International Management. Usually, classes are small, sometimes no more than eight students. They last 85 minutes, two times a week.

Even though the course is for advanced language students, not all of them have the same proficiency level. Some of them are "Intermediate-high (1+), some "Advanced (2)", some "Advanced (2+)", and a few are "Superior (3)".

Often, some members of the group have lived overseas or have studied abroad. Some of them may have had limited foreign experience.

Nevertheless, one of the goals of the course was to attempt to explain the history, the traditions and the values of Latin American societies through chosen themes. Learning to accept a difference and to cooperate with "different others" is an important skill in the modern world. To future international executives, who

are expected to function in those societies, understanding cultural differences is of vital importance.

> But cultural differences should not be learned as monolithic features. Cultural differences are found in mutually defining networks of practices not inventories of practices: in patterns of behaviors, not in behaviors as such. The most consistent cultural networks are located in an authentic text for listening, viewing, or reading. One working definition of authentic materials is that they were originally produced by native speakers to be read by native speakers. (Swaffor, 1992, p.238)

It sometimes occurs that a teacher takes an inventory approach to culture and offers students a ready-made inventory of a culture's attitudes, institutions and behaviors. Therefore, students cannot learn to interpret for themselves those particular characteristics, since those characteristics are stereotypes which are hardly meaningful themselves and since a broader context is missing.

One of the themes chosen for the course was the search for identity by the Latin American people and the repercussions in the international business sphere. This time, the targeted country was Mexico. We did not have a main text since the aim was to work with authentic texts. These authentic texts were presented to the

students as case studies of fundamental human relations, social classes, forms of government, national characteristics, etc.

Varied approaches, from diverse points of view to theoretical positions, were taken for the study of these special themes. We started with a general view of Latin American geography, especially Mexico's geography. An understanding of how the population is distributed in these geographical areas was sought. The knowledge of the geographical distribution of the population allowed us to study the mixture of races or "mestizaje".

Discussions about "mestizaje" (mixture of races) and its consequences took us to our first theme, which was the search for identity by the Latin American people.

Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes are essayists and writers who have studied most of the problems of identity in Mexico. They posed questions such as "Who am I?", "What is Mexico?", and "What is a mestizo and what does it mean to be one?".

Contrary to what happens in the United States and Europe, there exists in Latin America a long tradition of intellectuals and literary personalities who consider themselves to be the moral conscience of their societies.

Writers and artists have played an important role in the political life of their countries. Many of them have been presidential candidates, ambassadors, political commentators and lobbyists. Politics and literature have always been intertwined in Latin America. Writers like Vargas Llosa, who himself has been a presidential candidate, have commented about the value of

literature as a historical document. Others have seen in Vargas Llosas' own work a source of historical value.

Keeping these promises in mind, we tried to recreate the historical epoch in which the issue of identity was vital. For this we chose a novel. This novel, titled Arráncame la vida and written by Angeles Mastretta depicts life in Mexico immediately after the Mexican Revolution. It is interesting to notice that the entire novel is narrated from the point of view of a woman.

Extended literary texts present implicit and explicit statements about the culture which is being studied. In these extended texts, the cultural characteristics are rarely univalent.

When the instructor only points out contrasts in values, attitudes, and behaviors, stereotyping is the result. Isolated characteristics without being placed in context are not informative. When a literary text presents culture behaviors which sometimes conflict amongst themselves, the text creates a microcosm.

In order to avoid presenting only cultural contrasts, stereotypes, and isolated characteristics, the course tried to recreate a more complete system of cultural practices in extended contexts with authentic materials.

Besides the aforementioned topics, the students had to present oral or written reports about modern Mexico. The reports had to relate the main theme that we had studied with present-day circumstances of Mexico. For example, students discussed the relationships between the selling of Mexico in the time of Porfirio

Díaz and the law given by the Mexican state, years later, regulating foreign investment in Mexico. Students also had to share current news about Mexico in class, news attained from broadcasts on the local Spanish-speaking television station. Throughout the entire process, only Spanish was spoken.

Being able to see how multiple cultural phenomena interrelate and change is one of the more effective ways of appreciating a culture.

Our main intention in this paper was to suggest ways to introduce and integrate meaningfully and effectively the concepts of basic themes. Through the study of these themes we hope the student will accept a "difference" and will be able to cooperate with "different others". In order to avoid an inventory approach to culture, the course tried to recreate a more complete system of cultural practices with authentic materials.

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